DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 371 443 EA 025 793

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TITLE Education Looks at Poverty: Conceptions and Misconceptions.
PUB DATE Mar 94
NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the conference "Education and Community: The Collaborative Solution" (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, March 1994).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Welfare; *Economically Disadvantaged; *Educational Attainment; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; One Parent Family; *Poverty; *School Responsibility
IDENTIFIERS *Canada

ABSTRACT

Poverty is one of the most important influences on educational attainment in Canada. Using Statistics Canada definitions, the overall poverty rate in Canada in 1991 was 16 percent; 4.2 million people fell below low income thresholds, and most poor families fell well below the cutoff ($21,000 for an urban family of four). The most notable change in Canada's poor population has been the drop in the number of poor seniors and the concomitant rise in the proportion of poor families and especially women and children. Poverty rates in Canada have remained relatively high despite the enormous growth in two-income families. Minimum wage rates have fallen steadily in real terms over the past decade, and (poor) single-parent families are on the rise. Although the impact of poverty is widely recognized by educators, schools have not invested significant resources in dealing with poverty effectively. Schools cannot by themselves solve problems of poverty, nor should they be held responsible for poverty. At the same time, research indicates that schools can help by improving instruction, providing more preschool education, and forging stronger links with families and communities. Commitment and imagination are needed to take the necessary steps. (Contains a brief abstract and 57 references.) (MLH)

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ED 371 443

EDUCATION LOOKS AT POVERTY: CONCEPTIONS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

Paper Presented to the Conference
"Education and Community: The
Collaborative Solution"

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
Toronto, Ontario
March 4, 1994

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POVERTY AND EDUCATION - CONCEPTIONS AND MISCONCEPTIONS[1]

ABSTRACT

Poverty is one of the most important influences on educational attainment in Canada. Although the impact of poverty is widely recognized by educators, schools have not invested significant resources in dealing with poverty effectively. Schools cannot by themselves solve problems of poverty, nor should they be held responsible for poverty. At the same time, a considerable body of research indicates that schools can contribute in important ways to alleviating the impact of poverty. Important strategies for doing so include improved instruction, more preschool education and stronger links with families and communities. To take the necessary steps will require both commitment and imagination.

Introduction: The importance of poverty

Poverty is the enemy of education. Anyone who has read the research literature on education, and, even more, anyone who has worked in an inner-city school or a school in a poor rural area or on a poor First Nations community can have no doubt that the outgrowths of poverty are inimical to the values of education. Competence, skill, confidence, and commitment to the world - those things we want from education - are least likely to be found where students and their families are poorest.

In this paper I urge a stronger and more focused educational response to poverty. Schools are not primarily responsible for the existence of poverty, nor can they eliminate it. Other economic and social structures and policies are much more influential in either increasing or diminishing poverty. There is a danger that schools will be blamed for problems that are not of their making, just as there is a danger that schools will blame parents and children. We can usefully focus on what schools can do in regard to poverty even knowing full well that schools are only one part of the struggle for a more humane world.

The deleterious impact of poverty on education has been well known for centuries. More than a hundred years ago Dickens described it movingly in many of his novels. In the 1930s

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[1]. I thank my colleagues Jonathan Young and J. Anthony Riffel for their helpful comments on an earlier draft.

James Agee and Walker Evans produced a magnificent and moving portrait of rural poverty in the southern United States in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.

Thirty years of careful social science has consistently validated what writers have told us. There is overwhelming evidence that socioeconomic status (SES) has been and continues to be the best single predictor of how much schooling students will obtain, how well they will do at their studies, and what their life prospects beyond school are.

These points seems so well established as to need no further demonstration, yet one wants to pile the evidence on still thicker. A review by the Canadian Teachers' Federation cited among the consequences of poverty hunger, inadequate child care, behaviour problems in school, low self-esteem, lower motivation, delayed development, lower achievement, less extra-curricular participation, worse student-teacher interactions, streaming into less challenging programs, lower educational aspirations, interrupted attendance, lower university attendance, illiteracy, and increased risk of dropping-out (CTF, 1989). A House of Commons Standing Committee came to similar conclusions (Canada, 1991). Offord, Boyle & Jones (1987) found greatly increased rates of hyperactivity, violence and poor school performance among students of families on social assistance. Accidental death and serious illness rates are significantly higher among poor children (Barnhorst & Johnson, 1991, p. 100). "CHildren from poor neighbourhoods are 40% to 50% more likely than children from rich neighbrouhoods to be born too small, too soon, or with growth retardation", while infant mortality rates are almost twice as high (Canada, 1991, p. 15, 16). Maynes (1993) notes the much lower levels of school achievement in inner-city schools in Edmonton. Olson (1991) points out that children's experience of school often varies dramatically as a consequence of their social class. Radwanski (1987) found a strong connection between family economic status and the likelihood of dropping out of school. Tepperman (1988) reviews evidence connecting almost all life outcomes - educational attainment, occupational status, income, and life satisfaction - with family socio-economic status.

And these are only Canadian sources. Researchers in the United States have produced a much larger body of work, all of which points to the dramatic impact of low income and its associated problems on educational outcomes (Coleman, 1987; McLoyd & Flanagan, 1990; Wilson, 1987).

None of this research says that poverty is fatal to educational success. There are always some children who, despite highly unfavourable life circumstances, manage to succeed. An interesting body of research is developing around the study of these so-called 'resilient' children to see if common elements in their situation can be identified that are linked to improved chances of success. This literature is reviewed in Reynolds (1993). It would be a terrible mistake to come to the conclusion that poverty as a child was an irrevocable blow to one's future, since that would mean giving up on efforts to work with poor families and their children.

At the same time, there can be no doubt that poverty puts children at a tremendous disadvantage.

> Individuals who are poor... are confronted with an unremitting succession of negative life events (eviction, physical illness, criminal assault) in the context of chronically stressful, ongoing life conditions such as inadequate housing and dangerous neighbourhoods which, together, markedly increase the exigencies of day-to-day existence. (McLoyd & Wilson, 1990, p.49-50)

Who is poor in Canada?

Although we speak of 'child poverty', the poverty of children is almost always a product of the poverty of the adults who are looking after them. We might better replace 'child poverty' with the term 'children living in poor families' because the latter puts the appropriate stress on the family unit rather than the child alone.

Canadian social policy analysts have compiled excellent data on the nature of poverty in Canada. Most of this work is not connected to educational issues, but it does give a clear picture of the extent, nature, and demographic correlates of poverty.

The most common poverty indicator in Canada is the low-income cut-off (LICO) used by Statistics Canada. Although relatively arbitrary in its origins, the indicator has broad acceptability and allows historical comparisons. To give an example, the low-income cut-off for a family of four in a large Canadian city in 1993 was about $30,800; for a single parent with one child in a rural area the line would be $14,300 (National Council of Welfare 1993, p. 25).

While an income-based definition of poverty is necessary, we should also be aware that poverty is not just a matter of income. As Olson notes, "Poverty is... not a passively descriptive

condition, it is a state whose facets are actively socially constructed, mediated by how people understand, think and act." (1991, p.158). For example, university students may temporarily have very low incomes without thinking of themselves as poor. However income remains, especially over the longer-term, a strong predictor of other life events.

Using the Statistics Canada definitions, the overall poverty rate in Canada in 1991 was 16%; that is, 4.2 million people fell below those income thresholds. For children under 18, the rate was 18.3%, involving 1,210,000 children (NCW, 1993, p. 3,4). Most poor families fell well below the LICO levels; for example, in 1991 poor couples with children on averaged earned less than 70% of the cut-off (or about $21,000 for a family of four in a large city). Single parent mothers earned less than 60% of the cut-off (NCW, 1993). In addition, about half again as many people live only slightly above the poverty line, and can be considered as vulnerable to poverty (Barnhorst & Johnson, 1991, p. 22).

Another way of judging incomes of the poor is in comparison with incomes of all Canadian families. For example, the average Canadian family with children under 19 had an income of just under $60,000 in 1991, while the average poor family had an income of about $18,600, or 32% of the average (NCW, 1993, p. 16).

Poverty rates fluctuate over time, falling during better economic times and rising during recessions. The poverty rate for the general population and for children fell significantly through the 1960s and 1970s, but has not changed very much since. The rate rose from 1980 until 1984, then fell through 1989, then climbed again. However child poverty rates in Canada have not fallen below 14% even during the best years of the 1980s (National Council of Welfare, 1992). The 1991 numbers for children are about 1% less than the 1983 and 1984 highs.

Child poverty is not evenly distributed across Canada. Rates vary significantly by province, from a high of 27% in Manitoba to a low of 14.5% in British Columbia and Prince Edward Island. In all provinces, however, more than 50% of children of single-parent mothers are living in poverty, and the national rate for this group is 66% (NCW, 1993, p. 20). Poverty is also concentrated in certain sub-groups of the population. For example, the poverty rate among disabled persons is very high. Estimates are that poverty rates among aboriginal people, including children, are three times the national rate, or as high as 50% (Canada, 1991).

Similarly concentrations of poverty in the centres of large cities and in some rural areas of Canada are very high.

The most notable change in the poor population in recent years has been the drop in the number of poor seniors, and the concomitant increase in the proportion of poor families, and especially women and children. The poverty rate for seniors, more than double that of children in 1980, has fallen so that it is now only slightly higher. It is also important to note that for many people near or below the poverty line (though, as noted later, by no means for everyone), government transfers such as pensions, social assistance and unemployment insurance are a major source of income. The Economic Council described recent history as "expansion of income transfers [offsetting] the growing inequality in labour incomes" (1992, p. 7), and noted that while disposable-income poverty rates were around 16% through most of the 1970s and 1980s, market-income poverty rates would have been about 30% (1992, p. 7). The Council described Canada's income redistribution efforts as "modest" despite the sense of tax burden being expressed (p. 9).

Another important point about poverty rates is that they have remained relatively high in Canada despite the enormous growth in two-income families. The growth in labour force participation by women has not reduced the number of poor families very much (Economic Council 1992), although the National Council of Welfare estimates that more than twice as many families would be classified as poor if they did not have two incomes (NCW 1993, p. 23).

Child poverty comes in different guises. It may be helpful to distinguish among several groups within the overall population of poor people. The largest group is working families whose income is simply insufficient. These families have one or both parents working. Rising average levels of unemployment, falling rates of real wages, and the significant decreases in secure, middle-income jobs such as those in manufacturing have made it more difficult for Canadian families to support themselves no matter how hard they try. Most analysts agree that the overall state of the economy - the availability of good jobs - is the most critical determinant of poverty levels, and that when economic times are bad, those at the bottom of the income scale suffer most (Gunderson, Muszynski & Keck, 1990).

There are, as is well known, an increasing proportion of part-time, short-term, no-benefit jobs in Canada (Economic Council 1992, p. 30). At the same time, minimum wage rates in

Canada have fallen steadily in real terms over the past decade. In 1975 on average in Canada two wage earners at minimum wage would have earned enough income to put them about 10% above the poverty line . By 1985 the same couple would have been more than 15% below the poverty line (Gunderson, Muszynski, & Keck, 1990). "In no province would working full-time for the full year at the legal minimum wage enable even single persons without dependants or two income families with two children to escape poverty" (Gunderson, Muszynski & Keck, 1990, p. 114). In short, labour market income inequality has grown in Canada in recent years (Economic Council, 1992).

A second significant source of poverty for children is marriage breakdown - separation or divorce. It is clear that the economic implications of separation or divorce are serious and very negative for women (Gunderson, Muszynski & Keck, 1990). The Economic Council of Canada estimated that divorce resulted in an average 40% decrease in annual income for women, and that the decrease remained severe for several years, while male incomes increased in the year after divorce. The poverty rate for women caught in marriage breakdown went from 16% before divorce to 37% in the year following. Low or no child support payments were identified as a major source of this problem (Economic Council, 1992, p. 49). Indeed, women are generally much more likely to live in poverty, since unattached older women constitute another large block of the poor.

A digression on single parents

Educators frequently identify single-parent families as being linked to problems in the schooling of children. However many commentators are concerned that this focus on single parents, the great majority of whom are women, blames the victim instead of focusing attention on more important causal variables. Without undertaking a full discussion of this issue (interested readers can consult Hudson and Galaway, 1993), three important points can be made.

First, as has just been noted, female single parents (who constitute 90% of all single parents living with children) are overwhelmingly poor, and the breakdown of marriage is a major cause of their poverty. Poverty is also, it appears, one of the causes of family break-up (Osberg, 1981). Since poverty is so clearly linked to poorer educational outcomes, it seems quite likely that public policies providing better support to women after marriage breakdown -

for example improved child care and better child support payments - could alleviate substantially the negative impacts that are now attributed to single-parenthood. Other countries (such as France, Britain or the Netherlands have much lower rates of poverty among single parents than does Canada (Canadian Council on Social Development, 1992).

Second, female single parents face serious obstacles to economic success.

> With few exceptions, the burden of childrearing has always been the responsibility of women. The single mother often shoulders the complete responsibility. She has the bulk of the financial burden for children and she is severely restricted in her ability to earn an adequate living. For example, even if child care is available, a woman with responsibility for children will be restricted in the number of horus she can work, is less able to work shift work, and will require a job with flexibility... (Gunderson, Muszynski & Keck, 1990, p. 19).

Third, the evidence available, though chiefly from the United States, does not support the view that single-parent families in themselves lead to poorer outcomes for children. Mark (1993) provides some evidence that single-parent families can be stronger units in that there may be less conflict in the home. Finn and Owings (1992) found no significant differences in school achievement between 2500 children of single-parents and 12,500 other children when family income and social class were controlled. The National Child Development Study in Britain has traced a group of children born in 1958. Findings through age 16 showed that children from single parent families had lower levels of school achievement, but that these differences were small once socio-economic factors were taken into account (Ferri, 1993). Data from the 1986 Canadian General Social Survey (Gee, 1993) also show no significant differences in educational attainment between children in single-parent and two-parent families when SES is controlled.

Griffith (1984) has described the way the category of single-parent became, in one large Canadian school district, a symbol of parental inadequacy and an excuse for children's school problems. This is an unfair, even a dangerous stigmatization that educators must avoid.

A third element of poverty, and the one that gets the most public attention, is children who are in families that are almost permanently dependent on social assistance. About half of those who are poor at any given time are estimated to suffer from continuing poverty (Economic Council 1992, p. 25). We do not know enough about this group, but it is likely that assisting them will require unique policy measures.

One clear finding of research that is often not reported is that very few people choose to accept social assistance because the money is good (Danziger & Wineberg, 1986; Wilson, 1987). Indeed, social assistance rates across Canada, although they vary significantly, are (except for some categories in Ontario) too low to lift recipients out of poverty. Moreover, almost half of the working poor do not receive any benefits from unemployment insurance or social assistance (Economic Council 1992, p. 37). Government payments to the poor do reduce the impact of poverty, though many of these payments - for example, 80% of unemployment insurance payouts - go to families or individuals who are not poor. Compared with other industrialized countries, Canada spends a relatively small proportion of its wealth on income support for the poor (Economic Council, 1992).

There is a considerable amount of movement of individuals and families in and out of poverty status (Economic Council 1992; National Council of Welfare 1990) . The Economic Council estimates that as many as one in three Canadians will be poor at some time during their working lives (1992, p. 2). Many women do gradually recover from the financial effects of divorce, for example, and are able to generate incomes above poverty levels. Families may be thrown into poverty by job loss, but may recover if a new, reasonably-paying job is found. At the same time, there are families that remain trapped in poverty for many, many years.

The Social Planning Council of Winnipeg provided a clear and concise summary:

> In sum, the majority of poor children are living in two-parent families with a head who has less than high school education but has been employed full time for the year. However the risk of being poor is greatest for a child six years old or younger who is supported by a single mother with less than a high school education working part time or not at all (Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, 1992, p. 13).

Policy responses

I do not in this paper address the total range of policy responses to child and family poverty in Canada. What should be apparent from the preceding discussion is that just as the causes and correlates of poverty are multiple, so must policies to address poverty take various forms. For example, it is clear that high rates of unemployment are directly and strongly related to poverty levels. More jobs, and especially jobs that are secure, pay well, and have reasonable benefits, are a critical part of any effort to reduce poverty. So are improvements in child care arrangements, in property division and income support after marriage breakdown, in public financial assistance programs, in job training, and in many other areas.

Schools alone clearly cannot solve problems of poverty. At the most basic level, decreases in poverty depend on the macroeconomic situation (Danziger & Weinberg, 1986). If there are no jobs, or jobs pay badly, or supports for the disabled are poor, or adequate housing is not available, then poverty will continue to wreak havoc with people's lives despite the best efforts of educators. Moreover, several political analysts have noted that public support for anti-poverty policies is only likely when these measures are society-wide rather than targeted to the poor (Wilson, 1987; Heclo, 1986). Social critics have explained poverty as being a necessary part of our current economic structures. Even the oft-cited admonition to get a good education so as to earn a good income and avoid unemployment is increasingly doubtful as the numbers of well-educated poor and unemployed people rise (Gunderson, Muzynski & Keck, 1990). Although more education is statistically related to higher income, there is no guarantee that more education will lead to higher income for any given person, or for the society as a whole. Education levels in Canada have continued to rise in the last decade, but family incomes have not. More successful students in schools may, far from making everyone wealthy, simply lead to more competition for whatever decent jobs are available.

Nonetheless, because education is so directly and strongly affected by the deleterious consequences of poverty, concern about poverty should be an important educational issue. It does not presently have that status. Despite our knowledge of the importance of poverty as an influence on education, responses to poverty have tended to play a rather small, even marginal role in education policy and practice. Simply put, we have been doing much less than we could or should to address poverty as an educational issue.

Resource allocation to schools

One indicator of the low priority given to poverty in education is the level of resources committed to the issue. Since poverty is such a powerful influence on educational outcomes, one might expect that funding of schools would reflect that knowledge - that schools with higher poverty rates would receive significantly more money, and that support for anti-poverty programs would be an important part of school funding programs. That is not the case.

In every Canadian province the flow of resources to schools is based primarily on enrolment. Typically some kinds of enrolments are weighted more heavily for resource purposes than are others. Secondary schools almost always receive more resources per student than do elementary schools. Special education students are also funded more heavily, a problem taken up later in this paper. No provinces tie basic funding of schools to measures of socio-economic status.

As of 1988, only two provinces (Manitoba and Ontario) provided funding for compensatory education (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 1988). For example, Manitoba had about $3 million available for this purpose in 1987 compared to overall spending on public education of more than $800 million. Winnipeg School Division, which includes the entire urban core of the city, receives a special grant of $2 million per year from the Province for inner-city education. This adds less than 1 percent to the Division's $220 million annual budget. Compare these figures to the more than $60 million that the Province allocates each year for special education.

Money in itself will not address problems of education, of course. Resources must be used in effective ways, as discussed later in this paper. But funding is a proxy for the public level of concern about a given issue, and the small scale of financial support for schools facing serious issues of poverty indicates a low priority for this issue.

Why is poverty neglected?

Attention to poverty runs in cycles. One such cycle began in the early 1960s, led to a variety of public programs in many countries, and peaked in the early 1970s (Heclo, 1986; Silver & Silver, 1991). Out of this phase of concern came the concept of compensatory education and of early intervention. During the later 1970s and 1980s, poverty largely

disappeared as a public policy issue in North America. In the past few years poverty has reemerged on the public policy agenda, but in Canada almost all the work in this area has been in social welfare, as is evident from the citations in this paper. There have been few Canadian educational documents pointing out the impact of increasing levels of child poverty (see CTF, 1989, for a rare exception). Rather, the education policy agenda for the last few years has been much more taken with issues of economic competitiveness, standards, and governance. Where educational efforts have emerged that are related to poverty, such as growing concern about race and gender issues, the important role that poverty plays in unequal opportunities is not always highlighted.

Bill Maynes, of the University of Alberta, studied poverty as a policy issue in the Edmonton public schools (Maynes, 1990, 1993). Maynes interviewed principals, superintendents and school trustees. He found that though there was wide recognition of the impact of child poverty on the schools, the district did not collect data on poverty or its impact, and few or no formal policy measures were in place or planned to address the issue. Even among principals in inner-city schools, who could speak forcefully and in detail about the nature and impact of poverty on children,

> ...none of the principals referred to research or successful practice in other urban poor environments to argue that the programs they recommended would improve the success rates of poor children...
>
> Regardless of motivation, principals were not actively advocating poverty-related causes. It seems a paradox that, while they believed strongly that the districts should provide more support for the educaiton of poor children, they were not assertively taking advantage of their opportunities to favorably influence the political will to bring that about (Maynes 1990, p. 263, 265).

Why should this be so? What keeps poverty from having a more prominent place in the debate about education? The work of Maynes and others suggests several reasons. First, many educators and policy-makers believe that dealing with poverty is outside the mandate of the schools. Educators often cite the expanding expectations of schools to provide social services

as a problem that takes attention away from a more traditional educational mission. Explicit attention to poverty may be seen as another instance of diverting attention from what schools, in the eyes of some, really should be doing - teaching knowledge and skills.

A second factor is the absence of a sense of strategy as to how to address poverty. Maynes (1990) found that administrators and trustees he interviewed could not identify a set of policies and practices that would constitute the basis for addressing poverty issues in schools. The issue is seen as too big, too intractable for schools to be able to deal with it. Organization theory tells us that where no solutions are apparent, problems will get less attention (McKall & Kaplan, 1985; March 1984).

Also important in explaining the lack of attention to poverty in education is the absence of any strong political lobby pressing for action. Like other organizations, schools tend to respond to the issues that are placed on their agendas through various political processes. Vocational education, French immersion, special education and other school programs developed when interest groups, both inside and outside the system, began to organize and systematically demand action. The lobby groups for poverty tend to be weak. By definition poverty implies the absence of the resources necessary for effective political organization.

Yet there is good reason to think that schools could do more to address issues of poverty even if they cannot solve them. There are strategies known to be successful with poor children and their families, but we do not employ them widely in Canadian education. In the remainder of this paper I discuss three strategies that seem particularly useful - improving the quality of instruction received by poor children, strengthening preschool education, and giving more attention to building links with parents and communities. Other

Improving education for the poor

Improving instruction

We have good reason to believe that poor children, already facing obstacles when they begin school, receive an education of lower quality than do their counterparts in less troubled settings. Essentially, poor children, because they typically have lower levels of achievement, get less instruction and also get instruction that is less interesting and less demanding than that given to other students. This cannot lead to success.

The traditional response of the school to students with low achievement has been some form of special or remedial education - withdrawal programs, special classes, tracking. Knapp et al. studied instruction in 85 elementary school classes with high concentrations of poor children in 3 U.S. states. They describe the key tenets of beliefs about teaching children with low achievement as being: emphasis on learners' deficits, a sequential skill mastery curriculum model requiring mastery of basics before any advanced skills can be taught, teacher-directed instruction, a heavy focus on classroom management that is uniform across content areas, and use of ability grouping including supplemental instruction through pull-out programs (1991, p.4).

Students in these settings may receive less instructional time instead of more. The instruction they do receive often focuses heavily on rote skill development, with little attention to higher order skills. Students' own backgrounds and knowledge are typically not brought into the curriculum to any extent. Knapp, Turnbull & Shields (1990), authors of a major U.S. study on educating children of poverty, conclude that our typical practices for these children set low expectations, place too much emphasis on behaviour control, use too much seatwork, and greatly underemphasize the development of meaning by learners. Anderson and Pelliger (1990) reach the same conclusion in their literature review.

Teachers are well aware of the importance of poverty in affecting students' readiness to learn. Edwards and McKinnon concluded that the Nova Scotia teachers they studied "seem largely to accept the environmental-deficit position" (1987, p. 343). There is a danger that an acceptance of the importance of poverty turns into an acceptance of the negative outcomes of poverty; that educators conclude that their efforts will not avail. Knapp et al. note that while teachers frequently attributed children's academic problems to their poverty backgrounds, teachers did not alter their instructional practices consistent with their expressed beliefs in efforts to overcome some of the problems (1991, pp. 172-173). They also found that teachers' responses to teaching challenges were affected by teachers' personal background, by their beliefs about how their subjects should be taught, and by their feelings of personal efficacy.

The issue is not, however, simply one of the practices of individual teachers. Teaching practices are strongly influenced by school and school district organization and policy. Critics of schooling of twenty years ago (Kohl, Kozol, Herndon, Goodman, Friedenberg) and of today clearly identify the organizational limits on good teachers. Tracking and grouping are largely

determined at the school or district level, not by individual teachers. Some tracking is typically required by provincial or state curriculum frameworks, especially in secondary schools. Testing and reporting policies of schools or districts can have powerful influences on what teachers can or can't do. Padilla and Knapp (in press) show clearly how a variety of school, district, and state or provincial policies constrain teachers in responding to the needs of poor children. Coleman and LaRocque (1990) have demonstrated that school district policies and practices in Canada also have strong effects on what happens to students. Knapp and Shields (1990) report that most teachers they studied were simply following the guidelines of the district. Allington, studying literacy instruction, "concluded that few schools have organized instructional resources such that children who need access to larger amounts of high-quality instruction actually experience such access" (1990, p.I-3).

These findings do suggest some of the changes that need to be made, though here as in other areas of education there are unlikely to be simple right answers to the question of how we should teach. In general, students with achievement difficulties should receive as stimulating and challenging an instructional program as possible. Basic skill development needs to be integrated with more advanced skills. Instructional practices such as scaffolding, heterogeneous grouping, proleptic teaching, building on students' prior knowledge, peer tutoring, and cognitive coaching all seem to have promise (Stein, Leinhardt & Bickel, 1989). Pullout programs do not appear to be particularly effective. Madden and Slavin (1989), reviewing evidence on the U.S. experience, conclude that

> the achievement of at-risk students can be significantly increased, either by making relatively inexpensive but extensive modifications in the regular instructional program or by implementing relatively expensive but intensive interventions as pullout programs (1989, p. 71).

Finally, Neufeld (1990) notes the importance of seeing school processes as being holistic rather than technical. She emphasizes the emotional and affective links between schools and students, and the importance of developing positive student-teacher relationships. Poor children may bring many additional burdens into school with them, so supportive and understanding

teachers can be particularly important to them.

Strengthening preschool education

One of the first and best known strategies for alleviating the impacts of poverty was the development of preschool programs such as Headstart in the United States. One problem of poverty is that poor students may begin school without the socialization experiences that prepare other students for the kinds of activities that schools conduct. For example, Ann Manicom (1981) has illustrated the ways in which schools often make very explicit assumptions about the work that the family (usually the mother at home) has already done. As a very concrete example, she points out that when children initially learn to paint, they tend to mix paints indiscriminately. Red paint brushes are dabbed into a variety of other colours, and the result of this cross mixing is that the paint is soon a uniform grey, unsuitable to both the student and the teacher. If a parent has done some prior work at home such as instructing the child to "place paint brushes only in similar coloured paint jars" then one can proceed to other, more complex levels. If no one has given such instructions at home, the teacher must help develop the child's skills until they reach this level. This, she sugggests, is where the trouble starts for children whose socio-economic circumstances make it difficult for them to meet the teacher's expectations. Generally, the practices of middle-class parents tend to complement the work expectations of teachers, while the demands for child care, employment and the meeting of basic needs of poorer families and mothers often conflict with the demands of teachers. It is a crucial impediment to learning that, when observing differences in "who can draw", the teacher is really seeing differences in experience with drawing and not innate talent or ability. Because of their work demands, it is then very easy for teachers to see these differences not as as a lack of experience (needing a few extra lessons) but as ability differences. What is insidious about such a judgment, Manicom argues, is that it quickly leads to formal and informal forms of tracking and stratification based upon explicit and tacit labelling procedures.

The rationale for preschool programs is to provide students with the background they will need to meet the demands of schooling. Early advocates of preschool programs often saw them as ways of fixing the deficiencies of poor children. More recent work has moved away from deficiency theories towards recognizing that there are multiple kinds of valid and useful

knowledge. However, as long as schools require particular kinds of skills and behaviour, whether these are superior or not is a moot point; to be successful in school, children must master these practices, and preschool can provide a means of doing so.

The long-term impacts of Headstart and other early interventions have been and remain controversial among researchers. Early evaluations of Headstart indicated that it fell short of the claims of its proponents (Silver & Silver, 1991). As we have more experience with preschool programs, though, there is a growing consensus that they are valuable and can have long-lasting impacts, especially with appropriate follow-up. Karweit concluded that "there is an immediate and sizeable cognitive effect for participation in preschool that is diminished but still detectable in the elementary grades." (1989, p.87). Other researchers have come to similar conclusions (Barnett & Escobar, 1987; Stein, Leinhardt & Bickel, 1989; Reynolds, 1993). The very positive long-term results of the Perry Pre-School program in Michigan are often cited (Schweinhart, Barnes & Weikart, 1993), although they involve only a small number of students. Another frequently cited exemplary program is James Comer's (1988) School Development Program.

There are a number of conceptual models of preschool education being promoted, and no strong basis in research evidence at this point for preferring one to another. Karweit (1989) concludes that having a thoughtful, well-implemented approach may be more important than what the approach actually is. Parent involvement in such programs is often promoted, though a recent review found that the limited available evidence did not the show strong positive results claimed by proponents (White, Taylor & Moss, 1992).

Building links with parents and the community

Schools tend to value a particular body of skills and experiences, and to carry negative images of students whose background does not meet these expectations. Yet all children come to school with a range of knowledge and experience. If schools can build on what students already know, we are more likely to be successful in developing the skills we value.

Much has been written about the importance of working closely with parents. There can be no doubt that families are powerful influences on children and play a key role in fostering success even under difficult circumstances such as poverty (Reynolds, 1993). Michael Howe

(1990) has suggested that our main opportunity to improve students' learning now rests with parents and families more than with schools. Schools tend to see parents' role as being to reinforce the skills and practices of the school. However the most powerful impacts appear to develop when there is true mutuality between the school and the community such that each party learns to value and respect the knowledge, skills and goals of the other. Schools work with parents and families to promote the skills required for educational success, while also seeking input from parents and families about the adaptations the school needs to make to be more successful with students. Poor communities often contain large populations from minority cultural backgrounds, which means that educators need to be particularly open to examining school practices, not just asking parents to do things differently to fit traditional schooling. For example, schools with high concentrations of aboriginal students will need to work with aboriginal community groups to create successful models of schooling.

Many models exist for school-family-community collaboration. Nettles (1991) develops a taxonomy of four approaches - conversion (of students to fit the school model); mobilization (to increase citizen participation in education), allocation (using community resources to strengthen education) and instruction (teaching students about community relations). Her review of research provides many examples of each of these strategies. Included are prenatal programs, parent education, peer tutoring, work experience, parent or parent-child centres in schools, mentoring, integrated social service delivery in schools, and decentralization of school governance to name a few. Nettles concludes that

> ...programs can have positive effects on school-related behaviors and achievement as well as on attitudes... the consistency of positive outcomes... suggests that community programs may be potentially useful interventions (1991, p. 397).

Although far from uncommon, all of these activities, as has been noted earlier, tend to be supplemental or peripheral rather than part of the core program of schools. They command low levels of resources and are often vulnerable to budget cuts in ways that traditional classroom based programs are not. Schools continue to focus many more resources both on traditional programs and on remediation programs than they do on proactive work with parents and

communities (Levin, 1994).

Schools are most likely to use strategies of conversion and allocation - focusing on working with parents to help children fit into schools successfully. However there is reason to think that an increased focus on mobilization activities may be valuable. Tepperman (1988) has pointed out the importance of collective action in dealing with social issues. One of the reasons poverty is not more visible on the policy agenda of schools is the lack of political pressure from the poor (Levin & Young, 1994). In areas where marginalized groups have organized themselves, improvements in educational outcomes have often followed. A good example is the improvement in First Nations education in Canada as Bands have taken control over their own schools from the federal government (Levin, 1992). One of the important roles schools can play is to help poor families and communities organize to define and promote their own interests. In the current stress on collegiality, community and partnerships in education working with poor communities to help them mobilize themselves would seem to be a justifiable and useful strategy for schools.

Schools have a further responsibility in regard to the political status of poverty. That is to remind the public that poverty is much more than an issue of schooling. The consequences of poverty for educational outcomes are enormous, and although I have argued that there are important measures schools can and should take, educators also need to take every opportunity to remind policy makers and the public that addressing poverty and improving educational outcomes must involve a total social policy effort. While doing everything we can to alleviate the impact of poverty we must firmly refuse to accept responsibility for its existence or its eradication. As Mike Males wrote in relation to teenage pregnancy (itself strongly linked to poverty),

> ...educators [should] frankly and publicly declare at every opportunity that schools have no magic wand with which to rescue the nation from ... expedient anti-youth policies. Education lobbies are in a position to vigorously impress [sic] on policy makers the fact that reducing the incidence of early pregnancy requires comprehensive increases in support for impoverished families, for the prevention of child abuse, for the enforcement of laws governing payment of

child support, and for investment in opportunities for young people (1994, p. 410).

Conclusion

Poverty is a critical educational concern. Schools cannot solve problems of poverty, and should say so publicly. At the same time, they can be more effective in alleviating the impact of poverty and, especially, in assisting the victims of poverty to understand and advance their own welfare. We do have some considerable knowledge about how to do so. None of these ideas is new or especially difficult to carry forward. But the necessary actions would require significant changes in how schools organize instruction, and how schools view and interact with parents and communities. Resources would have to be shifted from older and more advantaged students to the younger and less advantaged; from remediation to outreach; from working in the school to working with the community. We would need to be willing to share control much more widely than is presently the case. Seeing education as something that is done by teachers in school buildings according to a standardized scheme is simply inconsistent with what we know about helping poor children. Many educators and others have long known and advocated these changes; the question is whether the rest of us have the will to do what is needed.

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